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Germany's Geopolitical Maturation

Strategy and Public Opinion After the Wall

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A majority of Germans look forward to the advent of the Clinton Administration and view a more concerted effort by the United States to confront its own domestic problems as a prerequisite for a strengthened U.S.-European relationship. German public support for NATO, an American military presence in Germany, and a broader "out of area" role for the alliance is on the rise. Germans also support European integration and see a strengthened European Community (EC) as a basis for a new "partnership among equals" across the Atlantic. Finally, the German public overwhelmingly supports the government's efforts to combat right-wing extremism in Germany.

These are the key findings of a recent public opinion survey conducted for RAND by Infratest Burke Berlin in late 1992. The survey was the most recent in a series of public opinion polls sponsored by RAND as part of a broader research effort to understand the future of German strategic thinking and implications for U.S. national security strategy. These survey results contain good news for American policymakers on an array of issues.

Germany and the United States

Nearly three-quarters of Germans view themselves as pro-American. West Germans remain more sympathetic than East Germans toward the United States, but there are signs that some of the old prejudices East Germans harbored toward the United States are also starting to break down.

The German public also views the advent of a new administration in Washington without trepidation. Despite George Bush's important role in supporting German unification and his close relationship with Chancellor Helmut Kohl, only 12 percent of those Germans surveyed believe that Europe would have been

better off if George Bush had been reelected. Half say Clinton would be better for Europe, but a third offered no opinion.

Although some German commentators have expressed the concern that the United States may turn inward and isolationist under Bill Clinton, less than 10 percent of the German public shares this fear. Instead, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) expressed the hope that a new administration in Washington will lead to new ideas and concepts regarding the future American international role. Half of the German public (53 percent) believes that the United States must confront its domestic problems if the United States is to remain a reliable partner and if U.S.-European relations are to be strengthened.

Germany and NATO

The RAND survey also documents growing support for NATO and the American military presence in Germany. Two-thirds of those Germans polled (66 percent) believe that NATO remains essential for German security, an increase from 58 percent in 1991. Support for NATO continues to be matched by a clear lack of interest in the creation of a separate European defense alliance that would exclude the United States. Support for NATO is so deep-rooted that Germans, even when confronted with the possibility of a complete American withdrawal, prefer maintaining the alliance and close ties with the United States. Even more dramatic is a large increase in the number of Germans in favor of maintaining an American military presence in Germany. Whereas in 1991 only 36 percent of all Germans supported maintaining a residual U.S. military presence, the figure for 1992 has jumped to 55 percent. This shift resulted primarily from a reversal of past trends in West Germany; some two-thirds (63 percent)

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of West Germans now favor a residual presence. Support has also doubled from 12 percent to 24 percent among East Germans. (See Figure 1.)

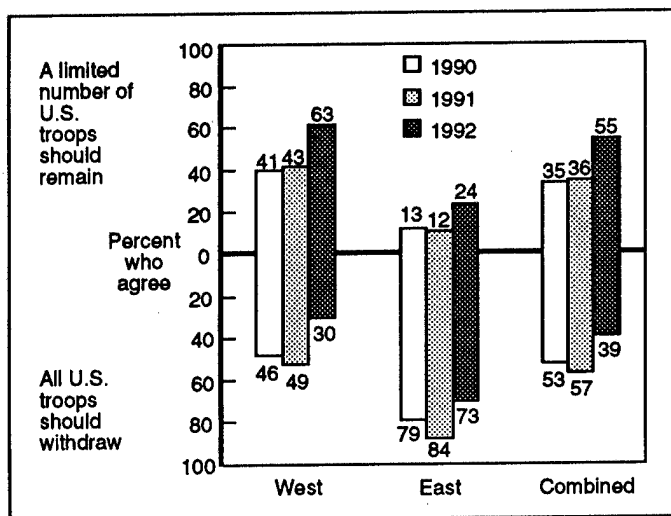


Figure 1—German Attitudes Toward U.S. Troop Withdrawal

These percentages suggest that the link between an American and former Soviet troop presence has finally been broken in the eyes of the German public. For the past three years RAND has asked a question designed to look beyond the current circumstances and to test whether Germans want a limited American military presence to remain in Germany following the completion of the withdrawal of former Soviet Union troops from German soil. Previous RAND survey results suggested that sympathy for the United States and support for NATO no longer necessarily translated into support for an American military presence. In 1991, for example, nearly six in ten Germans (57 percent) favored a complete withdrawal of U.S. troops. Whereas West Germans were almost evenly split in their views (with 43 percent favoring and 49 percent opposing a U.S. presence), East Germans solidly rejected a U.S. troop presence.

The reasons for this decline in support also seemed evident. Germans had traditionally justified NATO and an American military presence as needed to defend Germany against a Soviet threat. With the collapse of that threat, Germans still liked Americans and supported NATO in principle, but seemed increasingly less sure that an American military presence was still required. Precisely because Germans had viewed NATO solely as an alliance to defend Germany against a specific threat, they lacked the positive view of the alliance in terms of defending other countries or as a broader forum for coordinating Western strategy toward crises in areas on the periphery of Europe or beyond. Past RAND survey results had found little public support for expanding the alliance's tasks to

include managing new security challenges beyond Germany's borders and clear reluctance on the part of the German public to assume new military missions lest NATO draw Germany into new conflicts.

The rising German support for the American military presence, in spite of the approaching deadline for the completion of the withdrawal of former Soviet Union troops from German soil, suggests that the link between the American and former Soviet military presence has indeed been broken. Equally important, the survey results suggest that Germans are moving beyond their traditional narrow view of their security needs. This shift is undoubtedly linked to growing signs of instability in and around Europe. Above all, the war in former Yugoslavia and the prospect of a widening of the conflict, along with signs of instability elsewhere in Eastern Europe and Russia, are most certainly behind this shift. At the same time, there are also indications that Germans are starting to broaden their geopolitical horizons, becoming aware of their own vital interests beyond the traditional NATO realm and of possible "critical threats" the country may face in the future.

Such a trend is reflected in several of the responses to questions specifically geared toward exploring how Germans define a possible future security role beyond the traditional NATO realm. Asked to specify Germany's "vital interests," a majority of Germans look both West and East as they point to traditional Western allies, such as France (67 percent) and the United States (62 percent), but also to Eastern Europe (64 percent) and Russia (60 percent). Asked to specify what "critical threats" were most likely to menace Germany's vital interests in the next decade, Germans point to the dangers of nuclear proliferation (69 percent), Islamic fundamentalism (47 percent), as well as residual Russian military power (23 percent).

One key issue in the debate over the future of the transatlantic strategic relationship is whether the United States and Europe can reach a new understanding on how to deal with new conflicts that might arise on Europe's periphery—Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Mediterranean region and Northern Africa, the Balkans and the Middle East. Washington and Bonn, therefore, face not only the question of whether the two sides can agree on the desirability of maintaining NATO and an American military presence, but also on the purpose of that presence and whether Americans and Germans will continue to see eye-to-eye on a future political and strategic rationale for the Atlantic alliance.

In short, the key question is not numbers of troops but the future function of the alliance itself. New strategic rationales or functions NATO might assume in the future range from countering a residual Russian threat to intervention to stem new conflicts in Eastern Europe or elsewhere on Europe's periphery. When

asked how best to respond to this variety of functions, a clear majority of Germans support in principle the alliance assuming a new role in dealing with such conflicts beyond NATO's traditional realm. (See Figure 2.)

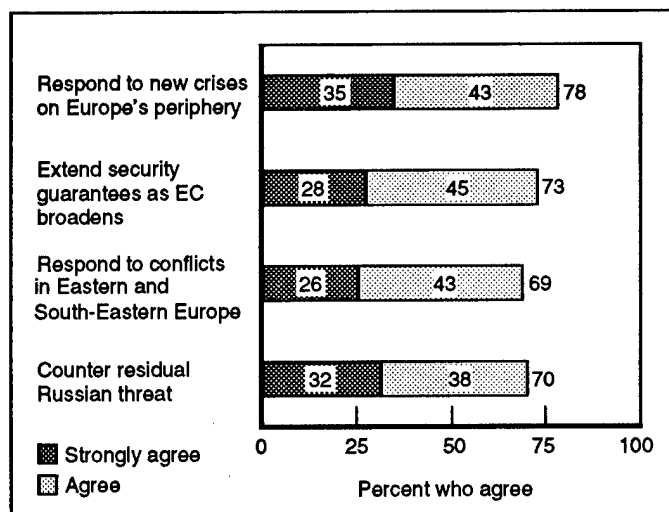


Figure 2—NATO's New Functions

Germany and Europe

Above all, Germans want to see Europe remain a close yet more equal partner of the United States. Over the last three years, RAND has posed a number of questions designed to test whether Germans viewed a strong EC as a future competitor or as a partner of the United States. The survey results again provide clear evidence of the German desire for an ongoing and more balanced partnership between the United States and Europe. Asked how they view a number of differing "visions" for the EC, very large majorities backed notions such as an expanded alliance between Europe and the United States as well as a "partnership among equals"—a phrase popularized by the current German Defense Minister Volker R  he. (See Figure 3.)

Germans also continue to support European integration, albeit with reservations. European unification is seen as the most important foreign policy problem currently facing the country, followed by the war in former Yugoslavia. Asked how they would vote in a theoretical referendum on the Maastricht Treaty governing European union, nearly half (47 percent) responded that they would vote "yes" with 29 percent opposing and some 23 percent undecided. German sympathies have shifted in favor of "deepening" as opposed to "broadening" the EC. Although a majority of Germans define Eastern Europe as a "vital interest," their previous enthusiasm for rapid inclusion of the new democracies of East-Central Europe into the EC has dissipated. Germans also continue to have reservations about abandoning the D-Mark; support for a common

European currency has slipped from 48 percent to 43 percent since 1991. Germans are also aware of the differences that exist within the EC. More than six in ten Germans polled (61 percent) believe that the EC members have differing interests.

Germany's Culture of Reticence

The survey results again confirm a strong sense of German self-confidence along with a growing willingness to assume more responsibility on the world stage. A majority (62 percent) of Germans polled believe Germany should assume a more active international role; and an even larger majority (77 percent) believe their country is best equipped to play the leading foreign policy role in Europe. There is also growing support for the principle of international intervention. Whereas in 1991 43 percent supported the principle of intervention, including the use of military force, in the internal affairs of other countries when international law and human rights are violated, support jumped to 53 percent in 1992.

At the same time, Germans continue to suffer under what Defense Minister R  he has termed Germany's "culture of reticence"—i.e., reluctance to think in terms of using military power to achieve their own political goals. The issue of the participation of German armed forces in so-called out-of-area operations has not only been an issue of conflicting constitutional interpretation; past RAND surveys have also confirmed the existence of a political and psychological hurdle when German's contemplate possible German military participation in operations other than the defense of Germany.

This culture of reticence still exists. Although a majority of Germans support the country assuming a more active role and back the principle of military

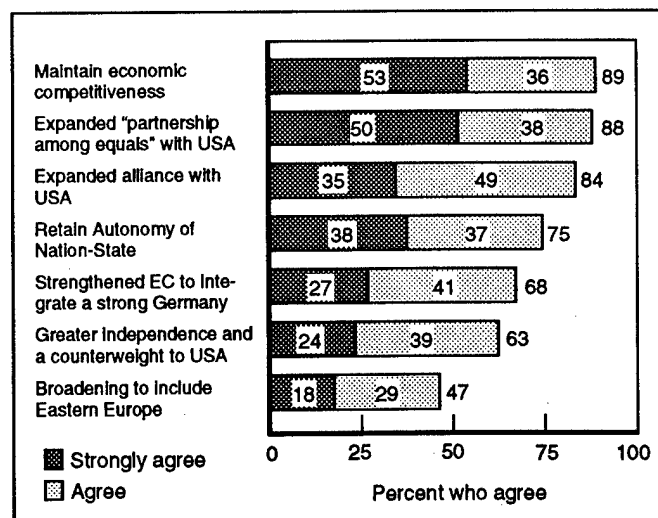


Figure 3—Visions for the European Community

intervention, they remain reticent when it comes to German participation in such operations. Whereas 53 percent back German Bundeswehr participation in peacekeeping operations, only one-third (32 percent) favor German military participation in NATO operations outside of Germany, and one in five (20 percent) support German forces participating in UN-sponsored operations like Operation Desert Storm.

The survey results, nonetheless, suggest that Germany's culture of reticence is changing under the pressure of events in the real world. The Persian Gulf War, followed by the war in former Yugoslavia, has already driven the German debate much further and much faster than many commentators deemed possible only two years ago. While many American commentators point to the gap between what the German public supports in principle and what it supports in practice, many German officials see in these figures a surprising degree of military support in a country with Germany's past and continued feelings of ambivalence toward the use of military power. It remains to be seen how Bonn will ultimately resolve the contradiction between the German public viewing their country as the power best equipped to assume a leadership role in Europe, along with support in principle for military intervention and the alliance dealing with new crises, and shying away from any German military involvement that would logically flow from such thinking.

Although domestic political issues were not a primary focus of the survey, the current strains in German politics were also reflected in the results. Germany is a country preoccupied with its own problems. Some 56 percent of those surveyed, for example, felt that the country was on the "wrong track." The most important problems facing the country are seen, first and foremost, in the domestic realm, i.e., the issue of asylum-seekers and the economy. When asked to identify the most urgent tasks facing the Bonn government, nearly nine in ten (88 percent) point to the containment of right-wing extremism followed by 85 percent who list ending the war in former Yugoslavia.

Germany's Geopolitical Maturation

The RAND surveys were initiated as part of a broader, multiyear research effort analyzing the factors likely to shape the strategic thinking of a unified Germany. The results of these surveys should also be interpreted in the context of ongoing RAND research on broader trends in Germany and Europe, including the

views of the elite. Germany is redefining its own interests, role, and attitude toward the use of power in the post-Cold War world. The results of the RAND surveys provide snapshots in this process. This process is certainly not complete; the numbers presented here will continue to shift as Germans confront new issues of strategy and possible future crises requiring national action.

Several trends are nevertheless clear. Germany's strategic orientation remains unequivocally pro-Western. Public support for NATO and maintaining a strong strategic bond to the United States has remained solid. Germans also support a strong EC as a stepping stone to a new partnership between the United States and Europe. While the prospect of growing German "assertiveness" has raised concerns in some circles, the RAND results suggest that such self-confidence or assertiveness is currently being channeled into institutions such as NATO and the EC. In short, Germany is maturing into the kind of strong partner in Europe that American policy has always called for.

At the same time, the future risks to German security all lie beyond the traditional NATO realm—e.g., Eastern Europe, Russia, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. Germans are becoming more aware of their interests in such regions and of possible threats to them. Their initial instinct is to turn to the institutions of Western security that have worked for them in the past, above all NATO, to manage such problems. At the same time, Germans are increasingly discovering that their own interests may at times diverge from those of their European allies or the United States. These issues will test the resilience of the German-American relationship in the future.

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